

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Let the Candles be Brought January 2, 2000 John M. Buchanan

"The future, which is not without ambiguity, is always a blessing of God. It is in the future where God sets his promise and toward which he sets the hearts of the faithful. The future is God's time, that time when our partial sight will become complete and we will know even as we are fully known... God is in the future. God goes before us, preparing the way and bidding us to join him in that pilgrimage that takes us from where we are to where we are to be.

Peter Gomes

Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

LET THE CANDLES BE BROUGHT

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 2, 2000

Isaiah 43: 16-19

John 1: 1-5

"I am about to do a new thing;" (Isaiah 43: 19)

Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home, we come here to church this morning, relieved that our technology and our systems have not failed us; grateful for human ingenuity and dependability. And we come looking forward into a new century with hope but also with anxiety. So speak your word to us. Startle us again with your truth and open us to the power of hope in Jesus Christ, your son, our Lord. Amen.

For months we've been thinking about it; worrying, fretting, planning, wondering what would happen. And then it occurred to us that we were in a kind of countdown, doing things for the last time: last check written in the 20th century, last meeting, last concert. And so it occurred to me that this would be the last sermon I wrote in the 20th century: not only that, but the congregation on January 2, 2000 would be in the unique position of having to listen to a sermon from the prior century.

It also occurred to me as I sat down to write that I didn't know what was going to happen as the clocks and calendars moved from 11:59, December 31, 1999 to 12:00 a.m., January 1, 2000. Y2K! Not very much did, apparently, although the morning news warned me not to relax until the banks fire up their computers tomorrow morning. Some things were very much up in the air. I didn't know whether I was going to ride the elevator or walk down 23 stories this morning. We weren't at all sure that our key cards would get us into the church this morning. So it occurred to me that the thoughtful preacher ought to have two sermons ready: one in case Y2K was a disaster, and another in case it was, as Daniel Boorstin predicted, a non-event.

There's a sense in which the latter may be more difficult than the former. After all, we have a lot invested—energy, resources and worrying. *Time Magazine* ran an editorial a few weeks ago on "Post-Millennial Syndrome" (11/29/99). It's in the form of an interview with a physician.

Q. What is Post-Millennial Syndrome, this new P.M.S.?

A. The feeling of letdown everyone will be experiencing starting January 1, along with a pounding headache . . . and wishing the world had in fact come to an end just after midnight.

Q. But won't most Americans be rejoicing that their PalmPilots didn't erase 700 names in their address books and that air traffic controllers at JFK didn't instruct planes to land in Central Park?

A. Certainly, we must count our blessings. But for years we've been told day in and day out that the year 2000 teems with consequences of all sorts: numerical, technological, theological. So when we wake up and smell the skim latte and discover that nothing has really changed other than the start of a new tax year and that meanwhile we're stuck with 500 cans of Bumble Bee Chunk White and enough batteries to power that annoying bunny from New York City to Juneau and back, there are bound to be existential consequences."

So, if it was a disaster, I wrote the wrong sermon. And if it wasn't and you are disappointed and depressed, please know that you are in good company and that the pastors and our Counseling Center are still on Y2K alert.

There are times when the future looms large. This is one of them. And one of the most common and predictable ways human beings respond to an unknown and unpredictable future is fear and dread.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal a few days ago, George Melloan told how "On the last day of the year 999, the old Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome was thronged with a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world" and who, when nothing happened, ran out into the streets of Rome, shouting and cheering and celebrating the fact that they were still alive. (*Wall Street Journal*, 12/21/99, "A Lot Has Changed Since 1000, But Not Everything.")

The same thing happened 100 years ago all over the world. Here in Chicago people took out full page newspaper ads marking the expected second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world.

Apocalypticism has been around for a long time. It is in the Bible. The early Christian church, living under intense and unbelievably cruel persecution, fervently prayed for Jesus to return and bring to an end the horrific ordeal they were enduring in his name.

And their graphic hopes and predictions have been adopted, misunderstood and misused in every generation since. My grandmother McCormick thought the world was coming to an end in the 1940's and that the anti-Christ was F.D.R. Mystical numerology adds a little hard copy to the enterprise and when big calendar changes occur, things can get nasty. Fundamentalist Christian zealots, for instance, reading the biblical apocalyptic predictions literally, believe that the Jerusalem Temple must be rebuilt on the exact spot as the old Temple, leveled by the Romans in 70 AD to usher in the new age and the return of the Messiah. The problem is there is a building on the spot—a very significant building—the Dome of the Rock, Islam's sacred space. And so, the more extreme fundamentalists, it is feared, could attempt to destroy the Dome of the Rock to start the process.

My friend, Joanna Adams, says that the world seems “full of millennialists who drool over the prospect of the end of the world—it can’t come too soon for them.” Joanna tells about seeing a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road in Georgia. “Smile! Our God is a consuming fire.” That is just not a thought that puts a smile on my face,” she quips. (“The End of the World As We Know It,” a sermon, 11/28/99)

And John Updike, writing about the “Future of Faith,” in the *New Yorker* (11/29/99) suggests that “the Christian Right, with abortion and school prayer as flagship issues, remains a vocal and intimidating political force, capable of getting evolution labeled a mere theory in Kansas.” Updike, who is a church-goer, worries that religion is defined in our time by a newly muscular fundamentalism—an ideology that feels and looks like religious fascism. A reporter who called on December 31st to ask about our observance was clearly looking for something juicy about the imminent end of the world and was clearly disappointed when I told him we weren’t into that and were more concerned about how to live faithfully in the future—not nearly as newsworthy as the impending end.

Many look forward with fear and dread, and many look forward wishing they didn’t have to. Trend analyst Faith Popcorn wrote that many Americans took a pass on large Y2K parties and stayed home, hiding under their beds wishing it were 1954.

There is another way of looking at the future and it is at the heart of our faith tradition. I chose for a text this Sunday a passage of scripture which I believe contains the most important word for the church and for each of us on this day.

It is from a section of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah which is essentially a letter written to a community of exiles or captives in Babylon 2,500 years ago. The literary form is poetic and it is among the loveliest ever written.

“Comfort, comfort my people says your God,”
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .
Get you to a high mountain . . .
 lift up your voices with strength
He will feed his flock like a shepherd
 he will gather the lambs in his arms
Those who wait for the Lord shall
 renew their strength
they shall mount up with wings
 like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
 they shall walk and not faint.”

I love those words. I love them for their beauty and power, and I love them because they were written to a community of people who had run out of options for the future and had given up hope. Their situation could not have been more difficult. They had no army. Their capital was in ruins, their leaders either slaughtered or exiled, their temple leveled and they, held captive, in a foreign land, in a ghetto.

I have always imagined those people spending most of their time remembering the good old days, how it used to be in Jerusalem, when David was King and Solomon his son, when our army was feared, when there was food enough for all, and our Temple, the glory of Israel, bright, gleaming in the sun, Solomon's gift to us and I love to imagine how those people felt when the prophet, after he wrote words of comfort and tenderness—delivered this:

“Stop it.”

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing,
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it”

There is in those words a very important faith affirmation. When our resources are depleted, God's are not. When we've used up all our options, God has more. When we've given in to hopelessness, God comes with new possibilities, new hope, a new creation, a new future. Faith, in this way of thinking, is not looking backward but forward, not sitting around the fire telling stories about how good the good old days were, but getting ready to join God in the ongoing drama of creation.

There is in these words a new way of honoring the past by remembering that God's promise has always been about the future.

I love the way British theologian John Taylor put it: “There are two ways of looking at time—Is the source of time behind us, pushing us from history into the future? Or is the source of time ahead of us, pulling us out of history into the future . . . so that the present always has within it the seeds of hope?” (*The Go-Between God*, p.76-77)

Think of what that means for the church. Instead of wringing our hands over the dreadful state of things and signs of obsolescence and redundancy and irrelevance all around us, the prophet calls us to watch for the new thing God is doing: to live loosely with the past in order not to miss the ongoing process of creating and redeeming and loving, which is God's purpose.

As we look into our future as Christians, there are several challenges ahead. None of them will be easy. But as I look ahead in the context of a theology that puts God in the future, pulling us, not somewhere in the past—I see:

- The necessity of coming to terms with the interconnectedness of the human race, the rapid globalization of the world and the reality of racial, ethnic and religious diversity. It will not be easy. Our faith tradition seems to say there is one truth and we have it, and that our vocation is to do whatever we can to convince adherents of other faith traditions with equally specific truth claims, that they are wrong and we are right. Any suggestion that our Christian responsibility to people of other faiths is to respect and listen and then to extend hospitality and grace and love in the name of Jesus Christ will sound to the Christian Right like a failure of nerve—and they will turn up the volume on the old way of witnessing to our faith by saving souls and making converts.

But whether we like it or not, we no longer live in Christendom, the Christian kingdom where all the subjects think alike theologically. We live in a world where two thirds of the people are non-Christians and we live in a society which is becoming amazingly diverse religiously. And so the challenge ahead will be to find new ways to be faithful to the truth in Jesus Christ as we know and experience it, without disrespecting the truth people of other faiths understand and experience.

Will Campbell, a wonderfully cranky Southern Baptist preacher and writer, suggested that we all should go to Mecca to celebrate the millenium.

"Most of the serious wars today are by people of competing religions. That's absurd. Let's do it this way. Judaism is the oldest of the three major faiths. Christianity is the adolescent and Islam is the youngest. The youngest is generally most favored in a family. So let's all go to their house, all kneel on a rug and put our heads to the ground and pray, vowing as we do never to kill one another again in the name of God. . ." (*Soul Among Lions*, p.49)

- And we must become the vocal conscience of a world heading for environmental and population disaster. World population just topped 6 billion. It will grow to 9 or 10 billion in fifty years. We cannot feed that many people. There is reason to believe that the ecosystem can't sustain that population, particularly if we continue to burn fossil fuels and spew hydrocarbons into the atmosphere. While ideologues debate global warming, the ozone has a hole in it and the ice is melting and flowers are blooming in January. And, in spite of the opposition from business, government and our own Christian Right, I believe we are called to be vocal advocates for God's precious but fragile creation. And in spite of disagreement from our Roman Catholic friends and again our own Right, I think we must take population and birth control and accessibility to contraception and choice on abortion and sex education for every child, with an urgent new seriousness.
- And I believe we are called as Christians in this culture to advocate a new, or old, way of being a community—a way that recognizes the common good, that recognizes and celebrates the reality that we are God's gifts to one another, an alternative way to the current ideology of competition, production and acquisition; a lonely and not very popular task if you've even raised the question of whether we really need 27 varieties of cat food.
- And I believe it is a Christian responsibility to advocate for children, the real and perhaps our only hope for the future. We live in a peculiar culture which has spawned unprecedented affluence for some of us but turned its back on its young. One out of four American children lives beneath the poverty level. Resources for education of poor, minority children are a fraction of the amount we spend on wealthy, majority children: family support systems continue to suffer lack of funding and lack of concern. All we seem to do intentionally for our children is provide an endless stream of mind-numbing, spirit-killing television violence and then provide them with lethal weapons. Our Lord blessed the children and it is time for his followers to take that mandate seriously.

- And finally, the 21st century will ask the church for a word about the meaning and purpose of human life—ask us, that is to say, to bear witness to what we believe and why. The most spectacular miscalculation of the last century was the prediction of Karl Marx, widely endorsed academically, that modernity would be the end of religion. The fact is that not only has religion not disappeared, but there is a genuine hunger for meaning and truth and value and ideals worth living and dying for. It is an amazingly hopeful moment for religion that is not afraid to ask the tough questions and enter the public debate and live out its convictions radically and courageously in the world.

We celebrated a birth a week ago—a birth of a child who was, we believe, the light of the world. That light still shines and the darkness has not overcome it.

And so the first sermon of Y2K comes to an end. The peculiar title comes from a story that I thought served rather well as our marching orders.

In Colonial America there was an eclipse of the sun that caught everybody off guard. Many of the state legislators in New England were afraid . . . they thought it was the end of the world. Several legislators moved quickly to adjourn, but before the presiding officer could call for a vote, another Colonialist stood and said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we will appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let the candles be brought.” (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation, Mark*, P.242, thanks to Joanna Adams, ob.cit.)

The future, Peter Gomes asserts, is a “blessing of God . . . The future is God’s time.” That has enormous implications for how we live and it has deep and powerful implications for you and me personally. Our future—our time—the time we have left to live, whatever that happens to be, is time inhabited by God. Wherever we go, God will be there. Whatever happens to us, God will be there.

Our God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

Amen.